

VZCZCXRO2425
RR RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW
DE RUEHCG #0107/01 0980653
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 080653Z APR 09
FM AMCONSUL CHENNAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2205
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3607
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0235
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHMFIUU/HQ USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEILB/NCTC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 CHENNAI 000107

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: ALLIANCE ARITHMETIC IS A KEY FACTOR IN SOUTH INDIA

REF: A) CHENNAI 104 B) CHENNAI 094 C) CHENNAI 060 D) CHENNAI 59 E) CHENNAI 27

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: No single party is likely to win a majority of the seats in India's parliament in the upcoming elections. As a result, whichever party ultimately forms the next government will need to do so by building a coalition government. This cable outlines the broad features of alliance politics and summarizes the make-up of the major coalitions in the four southern states -- a region where key alliances with regional parties played a pivotal role in the formation of the ruling coalition after the last two elections. Based on the pre-poll alliances, the outlook for both of the national parties -- the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) -- is dark throughout South India. But due to the ideological malleability of the regional parties, who will win a lion's share of the seats from South India, both the Congress and the BJP still will have a chance to pull in support in the inevitable post-poll jockeying to form a government. End summary.

Alliances key to power in New Delhi

¶2. (SBU) One thing is clear about the upcoming elections: barring some major unforeseen event no single party will command a simple majority in India's parliament after the votes come in. In the current parliament, the two national parties -- the Congress party (150 seats) and the BJP (111 seats) -- do not even have a majority between them. The remaining seats are in the hands of the left and regional parties. Because neither national party is expected to make the dramatic improvement over their 2004 tallies to get a simple majority, they will again need to pull in a substantial number of supporters from regional parties to form a government. In 1999, the BJP formed a government with its partners in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA); in 2004, Congress assembled the current ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA). It is also possible that a coalition of regional parties could form a government, a possibility commonly referred to as a "third front." As a result, an understanding of political alliances is crucial to analyzing the potential outcomes of the upcoming Indian parliamentary elections.

Alliance arithmetic is "key" to success

¶3. (SBU) Surveying the South Indian political scene, a senior member of The Hindu's editorial staff said "the alliance arithmetic will be key." He was referring to the process by which political

parties form "pre-poll alliances" with other parties in advance of voting in their states. Pre-poll alliances are especially advantageous because they help allies increase their collective chances of winning a maximum number of parliamentary seats. They do so by dividing up the parliamentary constituencies between them, agreeing in advance on which seats each will contest (a process known as "seat-sharing"). Seat-sharing ensures that alliance partners do not split their overall vote in a given constituency by fielding candidates against each other. Putting together a strong pre-poll alliance can make all the difference in a party's electoral fate. Despite winning a lower overall percentage of the vote, Tamil Nadu's DMK routed its rival AIADMK in the 2004 elections on the strength of its coalition. The DMK and Congress allied with four other smaller parties, while the AIADMK only managed to pull in the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is a marginal player in this state. As a result, the DMK won 16 seats, and its allies took the remaining 23, shutting out the AIADMK and BJP. The AIADMK did not win a single seat even though it won substantially more votes than the DMK (approximately 25% for the DMK to 30% for the AIADMK).

14. (SBU) Pre-poll alliances extend beyond seat sharing to support on the campaign trail. Party leaders will often campaign on behalf of their ally's candidates, urging members of their own party to vote for the alliance's chosen candidates in districts where the party itself is not running its own candidate. For example, DMK leaders will hold campaign events urging their party members to vote for the Congress party candidate as agreed by their seat-sharing arrangement. To reciprocate, Congress leaders will then urge their voters to support DMK candidates in other districts. A DMK official described these cross-party campaign events and endorsements as "essential" to the success of a pre-poll alliance. "If the leaders

CHENNAI 00000107 002 OF 004

don't campaign together, the people will doubt the alliance," he told post.

Alliances are political, not ideological

15. (SBU) Alliances are primarily driven by political calculations rather than ideology. With the exception of the near impossibility of an alliance between any of India's communist parties and the Hindu nationalist BJP, ideology is otherwise not a factor in determining alliances. The logic of political opposition, however, is a major factor. The Congress and BJP will never form an alliance on the national level, likewise state level adversaries such as Tamil Nadu's DMK and AIADMK and Andhra Pradesh's Congress party and Telugu Desam Party will not ally. Because most parties are non-ideological, there is no political dissonance in joining up with another party that has taken seemingly contradictory positions. This leads to a free-wheeling environment where the range of potential alliances is extensive and loyalties are never permanent. Examples of unlikely pairings abound: in Tamil Nadu the staunchly anti-LTTE Jayalalithaa has allied with the MDMK, whose leader Vaiko recently boasted about personally caring for wounded LTTE fighters; the militantly secular DMK once supported the Hindu nationalist BJP; and Chandrababu Naidu, once a regular at Davos and darling of Western investors, is now in league with Andhra Pradesh's communists. Dr. S. Ramadoss, the founder of Tamil Nadu's quick-to-change-sides PMK, put it bluntly in a media interview: "coalitions are only for fighting elections together and are not based on ideological sameness."

Alliances are temporary, post-poll scenario is wide open

16. After the results of the voting come in on May 16, the parties will be free to reconsider their alliances and many are likely to do exactly that. Dr. A. Ramadoss, son of PMK leader S. Ramadoss and the former Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare, highlighted this in his comments after his party withdrew from the UPA in March. He indicated that his party could still support the UPA after the poll results came in, telling the media that "we have come out of the UPA and will be joining the AIADMK. Post-poll, all my leaders have to get together and see what is there. They will take a call after the election."

Tamil Nadu: DMK/Congress alliance finds itself friendless

17. (SBU) Success in Tamil Nadu, which has a dizzying array of political parties of all shapes and sizes, requires a strong alliance. In 2004, the DMK and Congress, along with the MDMK, PMK, and the state branches of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI), won all 39 of the state's parliamentary seats. But the alliance has melted away over time, with the MDMK, PMK, CPM, and CPI all having joined the opposition AIADMK. Congress and the DMK remain together, along with a few minor Muslim parties and the Dalit VCK party. There was much speculation that the DMK and Congress would manage to pull in the up-and-coming DMDK party, which is led by Tamil film star Vijayakanth. But Vijayakanth shattered those hopes when he announced he would go it alone, turning the contest into a three way fight between the DMK/Congress grouping, the AIADMK's broad alliance, and Vijayakanth's DMDK.

18. (SBU) Most interlocutors agree that the loss of the majority of its alliance partners seriously damages the Congress-DMK coalition's prospects. The consensus view of their prospects is bleak: after combining to win 26 of the state's 39 seats in 2004 "Congress and DMK will be lucky if they win 10 to 15 seats this year, but they easily could be wiped out," said the Chennai editor of a major newspaper. "People want to be associated with the winning side, and the perception of 'winability' is mostly decided by the party line-up," a Chennai-based journalist explained. Moreover, the move of the PMK enhances the potency of the AIADMK-led coalition's attacks on the DMK and Congress's position on the emotive issue of Sri Lanka's treatment of its Tamil minority population (ref D). Even before it formally broke with the DMK and Congress, the PMK regularly attacked its allies for failing to do enough to remedy the suffering of Sri Lanka's Tamils. Congress is perceived to be

CHENNAI 00000107 003 OF 004

insensitive to the Tamils of Sri Lanka and driven by the Gandhi dynasty's desire to avenge the assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's assassination at the hand of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. By standing alone with the Congress party against an alliance that includes the LTTE-sympathetic PMK and MDMK, the DMK could suffer a backlash.

19. (SBU) Tamil Nadu's BJP is a non-factor. A Tamil Nadu political leader sympathetic to the BJP told post that "none of the state's major parties wants to be associated with the BJP for fear of losing votes from the Christians and Muslims." (Note: Tamil Nadu has substantial Muslim and Christian populations. End note.) He explained that the AIADMK, which is the most likely BJP partner, stayed away from a pre-poll arrangement for this reason, but added that it remains likely that the AIADMK would support the BJP in the event the NDA forms the government.

Andhra Pradesh: Congress loses allies, BJP out in the cold

10. (SBU) As in Tamil Nadu, the Congress alliance in Andhra Pradesh has come apart. In 2004 the Andhra Pradesh Congress party ran with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), as well as the state's CPI and CPM. These parties have abandoned Congress for the 2009 elections, joining the "Grand Alliance" assembled by Congress's principal statewide rival, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). This leaves Congress to contest the elections with only the All India Majlis-e Ittihad al-Muslimeen (MIM), a small Muslim party with a presence in the old city of Hyderabad only. Although the "Grand Alliance" is quite large, many interlocutors question whether it is strong enough to carry the day. They note that the parliamentary elections are being conducted in conjunction with state elections and that incumbent Congress Chief Minister YSR Reddy remains extremely popular in the state. Many believe that Reddy is likely to win another term as Chief Minister, and that his popularity will help other Congress candidates win votes.

11. (SBU) The wild card in Andhra Pradesh is the presence of the Praja Rajyam Party (PRP), founded by Telugu film star Chiranjeevi in

¶2008. PRP is contesting across the state, setting up a three-way race between Congress, the Grand Alliance, and PRP. Although Chiranjeevi has drawn huge crowds, up to 500,000 at a single rally, our contacts almost all believed that PRP is not well-established enough to win a substantial number of seats in either the state or national elections. But they do believe the party could be a factor, with Congress supporters arguing that PRP's presence will benefit their party by splitting anti-Congress and anti-incumbency driven votes between Chiranjeevi's party and the Grand Alliance. The BJP is completely out in the cold, abandoned by the TDP with whom it allied in the previous two national elections.

Karnataka: three-way contest boosts BJP

¶12. (SBU) Karnataka's political scene pits three fairly evenly matched parties -- the two national parties Congress and BJP, as well as the regional Janata Dal (Secular) (JDS) -- against each other. In the May 2008 statewide election, which was a three-way contest between the parties, BJP won an outright majority of the seats in the state's legislative assembly (110 for BJP, 80 for Congress, and 28 for JDS). Even though it won fewer seats, Congress actually had a larger percentage of the overall vote than BJP. This led to much speculation that Congress and JDS would form an alliance before the upcoming elections to avoid the same fate in another three-way fight with BJP, but they have not been able to agree on a formal pre-poll alliance and each party is running candidates in all constituencies. Despite the lack of a formal alliance, it is apparent that Congress and JDS have reached a sort of tacit agreement to minimize the damage they cause to each other by not running their strongest candidates in the same constituencies. It is unclear how well this arrangement will work. Despite the tacit agreement, the lack of a formal Congress-JDS pre-poll alliance leaves the BJP in the driver's seat in Karnataka.

Kerala: leftist coalition weakened by infighting

¶13. (SBU) Kerala's political scene is marked by two very stable

CHENNAI 00000107 004 OF 004

alliances: the CPM-led Left Democratic Fronts (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF). Though the coalitions remain intact, the LDF comes into the election struggling with internal infighting within the CPM (ref C), charges of corruption against CPM leaders (ref E), anti-incumbency against the LDF state government, and problems with the state's substantial Christian minority (ref A). On top of these problems, one of the LDF parties, the Janata Dal (Secular) (JDS), has split and one faction of the JDS is campaigning against the LDF in northern Kerala. Other LDF parties, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Communist Party of India (CPI), are disappointed with the results of the CPM's seat sharing decisions. All of the CPM's LDF allies are unhappy with the CPM's decision to work with controversial Muslim leader Abdul Nasser Madhani, who was implicated as one of the principal accused (later acquitted) in a terrorist bombing case in Tamil Nadu (ref B).

¶14. (SBU) Comment: For political parties in India, elections are more about who you dance with than who you are. In fractured multi-party races won by whoever gets first past the post, the composition of alliances can override other factors including the issues, the candidates, or the local and national mood. In South India's two biggest states -- Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, which will between them elect almost 15% of the Parliament -- analysis has focused on the composition of the competing alliances over any other factor. Newspapers in Andhra Pradesh have spilled more ink on the ability of the TDP to work with the TRS than the issue of the state's rampant corruption; Tamil Nadu media is more concerned with the DMK's inability to hold onto the PMK than with the issue of Sri Lanka. Both of the national parties have lost important allies in South India. Congress's lost allies in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu make it unlikely that the UPA will sweep those states as it did in 2004. The BJP finds itself alone throughout most of South India, with the exception of Karnataka alone where it will at best pick up a handful of seats above its solid 2004 performance. But all is not

lost for the BJP and Congress, as South India's always opportunistic regional parties will no doubt reassess the situation after May 16 and consider which formation -- UPA, NDA, or Third Front -- is most advantageous to them. End comment.

SIMKIN